

OWNEY THE RAIL MAIL DOG

With the advent of railroads in the mid-19th Century, it became possible to move people and goods faster and across greater distances. It wasn't long before the movement of mail benefited from the growing network of railroads across the country as well.

At first, mail was handled aboard trains in bulk. While this provided fairly fast service between the larger cities, service for smaller towns involved several trips on slower, local trains that added to transit time. As these small towns grew in number, especially along rail lines, a scheme was developed whereby mail could be picked up as the train passed through without stopping, and taken to a terminal city for further transport or delivery. Similarly, mail destined for these small towns could be dropped off on the fly.

A further improvement came with the sorting and canceling of the mail aboard the train en route. Highly skilled Railway Post Office clerks handled the whole operation of picking up, dropping off, and sorting/canceling as the speeding passenger trains rolled on through the night.

In 1888, a stray dog wandered into the Albany, New York post office and settled in on a pile of mail bags. The employees adopted the dog, named him Owney, and eventually let him accompany the sacks of mail aboard the railway postal cars. Owney traveled far and wide. He was welcome on the cars as a good luck symbol, since no train Owney traveled on was ever involved in a wreck.

Each time Owney returned home from a journey, he'd bring medals and tags affixed to his collar by the mail clerks he had ridden with; these souvenirs eventually numbered over 1,000. Owney's crowning glory was a 132-day trip around the world in 1895, sponsored by the postal clerks.

Throughout his travels, Owney was famous. His unique story was the inspiration for numerous magazine and newspaper articles, souvenirs, and special events. He truly became a celebrity.

Owney died in 1897, but the fame of the small terrier lives on. Several books have told of Owney's adventures and are enjoyed today in schools and homes. A Smithsonian exhibit honors his memory, complete with Owney himself, stuffed and mounted, including some of his many medals. And, the issuance of an Owney commemorative stamp pays homage to the little dog and his story. The New York Museum of Transportation is proud to be a part of the celebration with its own unique "Owney the Rail Mail Dog" cancellation.

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New York Museum of Transportation